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ABSTRACT

This report examines the practices of 19 peer review agencies in the United States, Britain, Denmark, Germany, France, the Netherlands, and Hong Kong to determine variations in peer review in the field of higher education. The report addresses: (1) the sources of authority for peer review; (2) the types and status of peer reviewers; (3) the selection of peer reviewers; (4) the formative and summative aims of peer review; (5) the focus of reviews; (6) methods used in the review process; and (7) the types of reporting possibilities available. Three major sections examined: the "classic" model of peer review as used in research; variations in current practice as revealed in this study; and problems of peer review and implications for further research. Four appendixes list the 19 agencies that participated in the study and provide a description of 3 of the agencies: Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (Germany), Comite National D'Evaluation (France), and the National Architectural Accrediting Agency (United States). Descriptions of other publications available from the Quality Support Centre are also included. Contains 11 references. (MDM)

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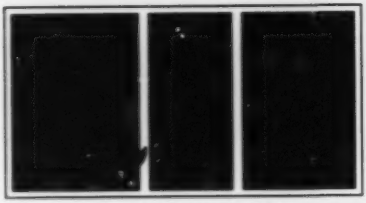

QUALITY SUPPORT CENTRE

Peer Review and the Assessment of Higher Education Quality: An International Perspective

by John Brennan, Elaine El-Khawas and Tarla Shah

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Peer Review and the Assessment of Higher Education Quality: An International Perspective

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Quality Support Centre

Higher Education Report No 3

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Peer Review and the Assessment of Higher Education Quality: An International Perspective

Foreword

This is the third in a series of reports published by the Quality Support Centre (QSC) of the Open University on issues concerned with quality in higher education. For information about Reports No 1 and No 2 please see the details about other QSC publications contained at the back of this report.

The Quality Support Centre was formed out of the research, development and information services of the Council for National Academic Awards at the end of 1992. It seeks to provide an independent voice on questions of quality in higher education. As well as publications, it undertakes projects and consultancy work and organises an annual programme of conferences and workshops on higher education themes.

For further information about the work of QSC, contact either John Brennan (Head of Quality Support) or Tarla Shah (Administrator) at Quality Support Centre, The Open University, 344–354 Gray's Inn Road, London WC1X 8BP, tel: (0)71 278 4411, fax: (0)71 837 0290.

QSC Higher Education Report No 3

Peer Review and the Assessment of Higher Education Quality: An International Perspective

Contents Page

Preface 7

Introduction: the focus of the study 9

The 'classic' model of peer review in scientific research 17

Variations in practice of peer review 21

Problems of peer review and implications for further research 43

Appendices 53

References 63

Peer Review and the Assessment of Higher Education Quality: An International Perspective

Preface

This report is the first product of an international project on the role of peer review in assessing quality in higher education. The project is one of four developed under the auspices of an International Working Conference on Quality Assessment in Higher Education convened jointly by the Centre for the Study of Higher Education at Pennsylvania State University and the Centre for Higher Education Policy Studies at the University of Twente in the Netherlands.

The rationale for the peer review project derives from the widespread international interest in new forms of public accountability for the activities of higher education institutions. Some of these forms indicate shifts in the balance of power and control between higher education and the state and its agencies. Central to these shifts is the role assigned to peer review, frequently regarded as the traditional mechanism of academic self-regulation. Yet peer review remains a somewhat vague and ill-defined concept. The term is used to describe a wide variety of practices and contexts.

The project has set out to describe the main variations in the practice of peer review as used by over twenty agencies — in Europe, the United States, and Hong Kong — which, in different ways, occupy boundaries between higher education and other parts of society, most notably the state and the labour market. The results are contained in this report. A second stage of the project will attempt to evaluate the effectiveness of the different approaches to peer review and the legitimacy accorded them inside and outside higher education.

The project has been undertaken collaboratively by the American Council on Education and the Quality Support Centre

of the United Kingdom Open University in association with other members of the International Working Conference. The authors are grateful for the advice and encouragement they have received from their colleagues in the Working Conference. They are particularly grateful to the United Kingdom Council for National Academic Awards for the award of a small grant to support the project. The Council championed the use of peer review in the assessment of higher education quality in the United Kingdom for over a quarter of a century. It was abolished by the UK government in 1993. The authors are also grateful to the agencies that participated in the project.

John Brennan and Tarla Shah are Head and Administrator respectively of the Quality Support Centre of the Open University in the UK, and Elaine El-Khawas is Vice-President for Policy Analysis and Research in the American Council on Education.

I Introduction: the focus of the study

Peer review has been defined as

> "any method of judgement of (a portion of) someone's work by one or more other individuals who are supposed to be knowledgeable about this field of work, usually from working in the same field, and that relies solely or predominantly on the judge's (or judges') statements" (Westerheijden, 1991).

Peer judgements are widely used within higher education as a basis for appointments and promotions, for the refereeing of manuscripts and research proposals, for the assessment of doctoral dissertations and so forth. These 'internal' processes of peer review are not, however, the main focus of this study.

Peer review is also used in the judgements which mediate the relations between higher education and other institutions of society, judgements concerned primarily with funding, with public recognition and with social prestige. It is peer review in these latter 'external' contexts with which this study is primarily concerned.

The external uses of peer review are broadly three-fold. Firstly, it is widely used by research funding bodies in assessing the quality of grant proposals. This is the most longstanding and universal external use of peer review. Secondly, it is used by professional 'licensing' bodies in their recognition of educational programmes providing admission to and training for a particular profession. This has a long tradition in Anglo-Saxon countries where professional bodies possess considerable statutory powers over significant parts of the occupational structure for the admission, training and conduct of practitioners. Elsewhere, such powers are retained by the state. The third external use of peer review is in the assessment of the quality of the educational programmes of whole institutions.

It is this third use which is arousing much international attention at the present time. There are now over sixty agencies worldwide with responsibilities for the assessment of educational quality and most of them have been set up only in the last few years. The most longstanding and extensive example lies in the accreditation bodies in the United States which, for over a century, have provided a

> "non-governmental, voluntary, and self-regulatory approach to quality assessment and enhancement which clearly reflects the divergent, semi-autonomous character of American higher education" (Peace Lenn, 1992).

In other countries, the state has played a much larger regulatory role in higher education, determining such things as admission policies, curriculum structures and content, examinations, staff appointments and tenure. A relaxation of state controls of these kinds has been taking place in a number of countries and has been accompanied by the setting up of national quality assurance or assessment agencies. In the process, higher education receives more freedom along with new forms of external accountability.

In yet other countries, and in particular those which follow British models, newly created quality agencies are widely viewed as replacing, not state control, but academic autonomy. Thus, in the United Kingdom, the traditional freedoms of individual universities over the content and quality of what they teach are now effectively limited by the operation of two parallel quality assessment processes.

Quality assessment in higher education is very largely about questions of control. At the heart of the higher education process is the relationship between teacher and taught and the conditions under which this takes place. One necessary condition traditionally claimed, though frequently not achieved, is the academic freedom of the individual professor or lecturer over what is taught and, to a large extent, how it is taught. In practice this freedom has been limited in many ways and, in mass systems of higher education with more 'extrinsic' functions, it is limited in new ways. When higher education

was mainly about the production of the next generation of scholars, it could be left to get on with it without close examination. When it is about preparing a large and key part of a nation's work-force — and at massive social cost — questions of accountability and external scrutiny arise with new force.

The question posed by quality assessment is very largely about *who* controls the pedagogic relationship in higher education. If the freedoms of the individual academic are to be constrained, who is going to do it? In practice, there are many candidates: the professor's/lecturer's departmental colleagues, the institutional academic community through its committees and boards, subject colleagues outside of the institution, the management of the employer institution and, outside of higher education, funding bodies, professional bodies, local, regional and national governments, and what van Vught has called the 'meta-level' agencies established by governments (and others) for the explicit purpose of quality assessment. And there are also the students, existing and potential.

It is questionable — and a subject for another project — how far quality assessment penetrates the institutional heartland of teaching and learning. Some argue that the main effect of quality assessment procedures is to make middle managers more busy with only minimal influence on the practices of individual professors and lecturers. A 'compliance culture' could be created whereby external requirements are met in a minimal and conformist way without much connection to the reality of the educational process. One of the chief claims made for the use of peer review is that expert peers are far more likely to apprehend educational realities than other groups and moreover, by exploiting the subject loyalties and identities of the academic community, they will be more likely to generate commitment and openness to the process of quality assessment.

Largely based on a survey for the Standing Conference of Rectors, Presidents and Vice-Chancellors of the European Universities and the European Commission, van Vught has proposed a 'general model' of quality assessment in higher

education (van Vught, 1993) consisting of five main elements as follows:

- **A meta-level agency** with responsibility for co-ordinating the quality assessment system. Its co-ordinating role would entail the formulation of procedures and formats for use by universities and colleges of higher education in the development of mechanisms for the assurance of the quality of teaching and research. Such an agency should have legal status but be independent of government. Experience to date in western Europe shows the importance of such a meta-level agent in gaining acceptance of a quality assessment system. Current examples of such meta-level agents are the Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC) in the UK and the Association of Universities in the Netherlands (VSNU).

- **Institutional self-evaluation**: based on the procedures and formats laid down by the meta-level agency, institutions would have responsibility for self-evaluation and reporting to the meta-level agent on a regular basis. Responsibility for such regular self-study should lie with the academics (and they must accept it as their responsibility) if the process is to be effective. The current self-assessment exercise of the Higher Education Funding Councils in the UK requires such self-evaluation by institutions.

- **External peer review**: following on from the report of the self-study, external peers would visit the department/ institution for a period of a few days during which they can discuss the self-evaluation report and the plans for future innovations, and include interviews with staff, students, administrators and alumni. Depending on the purpose of the visit (review of a specific programme of study, institutional audit, etc), these external experts would need to have specific backgrounds (academic expertise, management expertise, etc). External peer review has been the basis of assessment of quality in higher education for many years.

- **Published reports**: a report of the results of the peer review process should always be made. Such a report should not have the function of ranking institutions or programmes that have been visited. Its main objective should be to help institutions to improve the level of quality. An important element in the reporting process should, therefore, be to provide the institution visited with an opportunity to comment on the draft version of the report. Reporting the results of the peer review process is an important mechanism in the process of providing accountability to external agencies.

- **No direct link to funding**: there should be no direct relationship between the outcomes of a quality assessment review by the meta-level agent and the decisions (by government agencies) about the funding of higher education. Such direct relationships would harm the operation of a quality assessment system.

For the purposes of this study, we have examined the practices of over twenty 'meta-level' agencies of a variety of sorts. All use peer review as a central part of their quality assessment processes except in the case of one agency which had recently discontinued the use of peer review, that is the Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work. Some of the agencies are concerned exclusively with the assessment of research quality while others — a majority — are concerned with the assessment of educational or teaching quality, whether at the programme or institutional level or both. The agencies are more or less evenly divided between the United States and Europe plus a lone representative from South East Asia. In Europe, Britain, Denmark, Germany, France and the Netherlands are included although nearly half of the actual agencies are based in Britain. The study does not therefore claim to be geographically representative — although it should be remembered that agencies and processes of this kind are still alien to many parts of the world — nor does it claim that the agencies selected are necessarily typical of their type. The aim was to obtain information from a sufficient number of agencies in order to detect and describe variations in the practice of peer review. It was felt important to include examples of both research

assessment and the assessment of education, in part so that the well-established procedures of the former might be used as a basis for examination of the newer operations concerned with the latter. The agencies that took part in the study are listed and described briefly in Appendix I of this report.

The study was organised around seven 'modalities' of peer review as set out in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Modalities of Peer Review	
1. Sources of Authority	♦ peer community ♦ institutional management ♦ external bureaucracy
2. Types of Peer	♦ subject community ♦ institutional community ♦ bureaucratically-sponsored group
3. Selection of Peers	♦ the 'reviewees' ♦ the peer group ♦ the bureaucrats
4. Aims of Review	♦ summative ♦ formative ♦ summative/formative
5. Focus of Review	♦ intentions ♦ achievements ♦ procedures
6. Methods	♦ documentation review ♦ on site visits
7. Reportage	♦ private/agreed ♦ public/agreed ♦ private/reviewers only ♦ public/reviewers only

In considering the *sources of authority* for peer review, we were interested in the relationship between the 'moral' authority of the informal peer community and its relationships to internal managerial or external bureaucratic authorities (eg research councils, accreditation agencies).

As far as *types of peer* were concerned, we anticipated that the 'classic' research reference group of an (inter)national subject community would be modified in some forms of quality assessment of education with the term 'peer' being used to refer to other academics or professionals or even employers. We were also interested in the status of the peer reviewers with respect to those being reviewed, whether it was equal or higher and how the diversity of mass higher education systems was being taken into account.

We were interested in the *selection of peers* as a major factor influencing the integrity of the peer review process and the legitimacy of the judgements reached by it. Peers are both colleagues and competitors, the former attribute raising questions of external legitimacy and the latter attribute raising questions of internal legitimacy.

We wanted to examine the balance of emphasis accorded to formative and summative *aims* (improvement and accountability), how far both were being combined and with what effect. Is the capacity of peer review to provoke 'voluntary' change and improvement undermined when summative judgements linked to funding or accreditation are involved?

The *focus of review* is linked to aims but it is also linked to the availability of information. Information about intentions and procedures is often more readily available than information about achievements and this is sometimes seen as one of the chief deficiencies of peer review. Can this problem be overcome?

A number of *reporting* possibilities are available. Maximum openness in publication can lead to blandness but also brings the threat of misuse. Openness in the peer review process might be

encouraged by limited public reporting of its outcomes but this could have consequences for credibility and usefulness of the process to those outside of higher education.

The above issues were incorporated into an open-ended questionnaire which was administered by post, telephone or person to the agencies selected. In some cases, follow-up interviews occurred and, in most cases, the agencies concerned supplied background information about their structures and operation.

The remainder of this report is divided into three major sections: (i) the 'classic' model of peer review as used in research, (ii) variations in current practice as revealed by the survey, (iii) problems of peer review and implications for further research.

II The 'classic' model of peer review in scientific research

As pointed out by Westerheijden, peer review in science is 'a mechanism of collegiate control, in which scarce resources, such as journal space, research grants, or government money are distributed' (Westerheijden, 1991). Individual scientists, as both producers and consumers of science, are thus, at different times likely to find themselves in the roles of both reviewer and reviewed. However, in larger scientific communities, the opportunities for each individual scientist to occupy the reviewer role may be more limited and a smaller, somewhat exclusive coterie of reviewers may exist. In such cases, suspicion of the process and the decisions reached may be more likely to occur. Another reason for suspicion is that more tends to hang on the outcomes than in the past. Increased competition for scarce resources is a feature in many countries as the costs of research have risen at a time of economic recession and with larger numbers of researchers submitting applications for grants.

Notwithstanding the existence of serious 'strains' in the peer review of research, the method appears to retain widespread support in the academic community and is not seriously challenged from outside of it. This is all the more surprising as several studies have cast doubts on its effectiveness (eg Abrams, 1991, Chubin and Hackett, 1990). In a 1981 study in the United States, the authors concluded that the likelihood of being awarded a grant depended to a considerable extent on chance. Reassessing 150 grant applications, the authors reported that between 24 per cent and 30 per cent of decisions would be reversed (Cole, Cole and Simon, 1981). The peer review process has been criticised variously for intellectual bias, social bias and random error (Westerheijden, 1991).

The continued support for the use of peer review may depend less on evidence for its objective success than on the lack of

better alternatives. As a recent report by the Advisory Board for the Research Councils (ABRC) in the UK concludes:

> "... while any system of human decision-making is liable to fallibility, peer review is the only practicable method of assessment in the field of basic research — in part, because it has the overwhelming support of the academic community. However, the imperfections of peer review should be recognised, as should the consequent obligation to work hard continually on peer review practices to make these as effective as possible."
>
> (ABRC, 1990)

Note, however, the reference to *basic* research. It is the difficulty of finding alternative indicators or sources of judgements in this area that maintains the unassailability of peer judgements. Considerations of relevance or application do not apply. The 'customers' are other scientists. Although even in basic research, the distinction can be made between the assessment of quality and the decisions which result from that assessment. The former may be exclusively a matter for expert peers, the latter may be influenced by other considerations, for example cost.

There have been attempts to develop other forms of research assessment, particularly where the unit of assessment is a research group or department rather than a specific project or individual. An assessment of departments has been conducted periodically in the United States, beginning in 1963 (El-Khawas, 1993). Indicators of research productivity, eg numbers of publications and citations, amount of research monies gained, have been used by the funding councils in the United Kingdom in recent years to only muted criticism from the academic community. However, even here, the trend continues to depend on qualitative judgements made largely by academic peers.

Peer review of research appears also to have developed well-established structures and procedures to underpin it. The commonly used tools of peer review of research are mail reviews, committee discussions and visiting groups. The latter

are comparatively rare, being limited to the review of major investments, eg research centres. More commonly, specialist views are obtained by mail to be followed by committee deliberation where proposals can be calibrated against each other. According to the ABRC report, something between three and five mail reviews need to be sought in order to obtain an overall view and a decision likely to command support among the research community. As well as a need for several reviewers, great importance is attached to identifying appropriate expertise. Many research councils have developed extensive databases and registers that identify the specialities of potential reviewers.

The ABRC report provides a checklist of the 'necessities for any system of peer review' as follows:

- the need to review practices continually bearing in mind the inherent fallibility of peer review;
- the need to expose peer review practices thoroughly to the academic community, including providing information on peer review, and strategic and managerial, inputs to decision-making;
- the need to choose peers well;
- the need to provide a 'return' to the research community in the form of feedback from decisions;
- the need to demonstrate fully the equivalence in intellectual standards across all modes of support;
- the need to substantiate initial appraisal decisions by appropriate monitoring and evaluation.

(ABRC, 1990)

Peer review of research is conducted within tightly bounded — if increasingly large — communities of specialist scholars. Considerable efforts are taken to match the specialist expertise of the research proposal to the expertise of several specialist scholars. The credibility of the judgements reached is based on this shared specialist expertise of reviewer and reviewed. Considerable resources are expended on selecting peers, on ensuring that a range of expert views is sought on any proposal

and that decisions are not contaminated by extraneous factors. There is relatively little face to face interaction between reviewers and reviewed and, in the cases covered by this study, relatively little feedback on decisions. There appears to be limited or no rights of appeal against decisions and the identity of reviewers is frequently not revealed to those being reviewed. The aims appear to be primarily summative rather than formative. Procedures are well established and not under serious criticism.

III Variations in the practice of peer review

Whereas few alternatives exist for peer review in research, approaches to the assessment of educational quality include several alternative approaches. The traditional view is that, within some kind of regulatory framework provided by the state, quality in higher education is best left to individual professors. From this view quality is determined by the credentials of those who are hired and thus the key quality control mechanisms are the regulations and procedures which determine the appointment of academic staff. Almost at the other extreme is the 'stakeholder approach' which emphasises the large number of interest groups in higher education and proposes that the quality judgements of all of them should be taken into account. Thus the views of students and graduates, parents and employers, community representatives and politicians, university managers and administrators all compete with the views of academics in making judgements about quality.

The University of Central England in Birmingham is currently undertaking a three year project entitled *Quality in Higher Education* with the aim of developing a methodology for assessing quality in higher education. This project has adopted a 'stakeholder approach' to quality. It is examining what different stakeholders regard as important in assessing the quality of teaching and learning. The key stakeholders identified for the purposes of the project are: employers, students, staff, government, validating bodies, assessment bodies and funding councils. The views of different stakeholders have been sought through questionnaire surveys, interviews with key personnel and review of documentation. The stakeholder approach to quality assessment is often linked to attempts to establish market regulation of higher education.

In contrast to the stakeholder approach, the neutrality of an independent inspectorate has its advocates in some systems. Ultimately representative of the state, inspectors may be able to

stand aside from the vested and partial interests of those involved in higher education — whether as producers or consumers — and provide impartial views of quality. Also supposedly neutral are performance indicators (PIs) which hold the promise of removing the judgmental element entirely. In practice, however, major judgements are involved in determining which PIs to use and the emerging orthodoxy appears to be that PIs can be useful aids to quality judgements but cannot stand instead of them.

What then of the role of academic peers in the quality assessment process? Peer review is, according to van Vught, one of the five essential elements in a general model of quality assessment in higher education. But what exactly is meant by peer review in this context? Is it the same kind of process that has achieved support in the assessment of research quality? Who are the peers and what is expected of them? These are the questions which we turn to now, drawing on the results of the survey of quality assessment agencies approached for this study.

Sources of authority

Peer judgements possess a *moral authority* based on the shared membership, knowledge and values of the peer community. These are most clearly seen in subject-based groupings of peers which claim exclusive possession of specialist knowledge and competence. Members share a common educational background and professional situation which are the basis of shared interests and loyalties between reviewers and reviewed. It may be hypothesised that these characteristics will be associated with a high degree of legitimacy of peer judgements within the peer community itself.

The moral authority of the peer group is based partly on competence and partly on values. Competence is required and found exclusively in the peer group because of the complexity of the activity being evaluated. Because of this exclusivity and complexity, a problem of 'judging the judges' arises

and values of integrity and disinterestedness need also to be present in order for judgements to carry authority and acceptability.

When members of a peer group are drawn from a range of subjects and sources of expertise, claims to competence and to common values are often strengthened by the use of training and orientation and by the use of detailed evaluative criteria. Such steps appear to strengthen the 'voice' of the professional community and lend credibility through the reliance on 'objective' criteria.

There can be a conflict between disinterestedness and competence. Thus, subject experts score high on competence but may be weak on disinterestedness. Groups being reviewed may fear the interests of potential competitors. Outsiders may suspect that a shared interest and loyalty to the subject and to subject colleagues will lessen the critical potential of the review. The importance of such concerns will vary with the purposes of the review. Solutions may involve multi-layered review (eg the British Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and the French Comité National D'Evaluation (CNE)), administrative controls (eg the British Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA)), and allowing the group being reviewed to challenge names on the tentative list of peer group members (eg several specialised accreditation groups in the United States).

Where peer groups are not subject-based (eg the British Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC)), disinterestedness may be less of a problem but questions of competence become greater. Competence from prior knowledge and experience cannot be relied upon and the agency may need to provide it through training and briefing its peer members, at which point the members become rather more (or less) than their peers under review.

Peer review also derives authority from its *sponsoring organisation*. The organisation may possess legal or financial powers over the reviewed group and decisions about the exercise of such powers may be influenced by the results of peer review.

External authority of this sort may strengthen substantially the impact of peer review, particularly on those matters which are under direct external control. Thus, a research centre might expand or contract, a programme of study might be discontinued or substantially changed, as a direct result of external decisions based on peer review. Impact, however, which is essentially dependent on 'voluntaristic' behaviour on the part of the reviewed group will not necessarily be strengthened by legal and financial authority. Forms of compliant behaviour may be encouraged which achieve the 'right' kind of outcome to satisfy the external authority.

Not all peer review groups have decision-making authority. At one extreme, a visiting review team has full delegated authority for decision-making from its parent organisation. At another extreme, the results of the review are but one element feeding into decisions to be made by a quite different unit of the organisation. Intermediate positions exist, such as reporting back to a parent committee which has decision-making powers or ratification of decisions by a separate organisation. It may be hypothesised that the complexity and transparency of the decision-making process will influence the relationship between reviewers and reviewed. To what extent and how are the reviewers responsible for eventual decisions?

Within Europe in only a minority of cases is the peer review group endowed with decision-making powers. In most cases, the group normally prepares a report for endorsement by the sponsoring organisation at committee level. Some groups make decisions on behalf of the academic community but an equal number make decisions on behalf of government. Not surprisingly, most bodies with funding responsibilities are in the latter camp. In the United States the peer reviewers often have a fact-finding role, not decision-making authority. In research funding agencies, the decisions are frequently taken by administrators, following peer evaluations. In some accrediting agencies, a separate board or commission (ie another layer of 'peers' who are elected to the board for specified terms) makes formal decisions.

The distinction between making a judgement about quality and taking a decision based on that judgement is by no means always clear. Peers may be involved in both but quite possibly not the same peers. Insofar as there is a common pattern it is, following the research assessment model, for judgements about quality to be made by specialist subject experts and for decision-making to be left to a more broadly-based group. But this is by no means the only possibility. Decisions may not be taken by the peer group at all but by managers and administrators, possibly in a different organisation from the one carrying out the peer review. Nor is it always the case that judgements are made by specialist experts.

Many of these differences relate to ownership. Professional bodies and accreditation agencies most jealously guard the monopoly of specialist peer authority over all stages of the quality assessment process. In other cases, peers act more as consultants, lending competence and moral authority to processes whose authority ultimately derives from legal and financial sources.

Types of Peers

Practice varies substantially in the types of peers used, in the backgrounds and expertise that the different agencies consider necessary in the peer groups they establish.

Some of the main types of peers have already been alluded to. Depending on the focus of the review, the peer group may be part of a 'real' academic community or be specially constructed by an internal or external bureaucracy. At its loosest, the term 'peer' refers to other academics or professionals. More commonly it refers to an (inter)national subject community.

Peers may share organisational or subject memberships, occasionally both and sometimes neither. Peer groups may be constructed so as to contain all of the above. Groups may be specially constructed for a single event or activity or be given a semi-permanent existence with longer-term goals and responsibilities. The latter case may provide the basis for

an initially diverse group to acquire the shared knowledge and values of a pre-existing subject 'community'. This may be something to be aimed for (CNAA) or to be avoided (CNE).

Individual members may belong to several peer groups simultaneously and may derive power and status from so doing. Role ambiguity and even confusion may also result. In the UK, overlapping memberships of the more powerful professional associations may particularly give rise to role confusion. When working on behalf of a different agency, it may be the goals and values of the professional association, rather than the sponsoring agency, which hold most sway over the peers.

Status within academe is traditionally bestowed by achievement in scholarship and research. And this is still frequently the basis for selection into organised peer review activity. However, in cases where the focus of review is not on research but on teaching programmes or organisational processes, research experience and expertise may not be relevant. Yet expertise and experience of other types of academic activity are less easy to substantiate and less likely to be the basis of professional reputation. Thus, even where peers are selected for subject expertise, its basis may differ and be more or less difficult to substantiate.

Peers will not necessarily share a subject competence with those being reviewed. This would be very unlikely in research assessment but perfectly common in the assessment of education programmes. In the latter case, they may be experienced teachers in other fields. The VSNU in the Netherlands deliberately includes an 'educational' expert in its visiting panels otherwise comprised of subject specialists.

Nor are peers drawn exclusively from within higher education. Subject specialists working outside of higher education will bring particular competencies and professional interests into the review process whilst sharing the specialist knowledge and educational backgrounds of those being reviewed. But the same cannot be assumed of, for example, representatives of employers. The concept of 'peer' is stretched to its limit in such cases.

A related matter concerns the status of the peer reviewers in comparison to the status of the reviewed group. On whatever criteria status is measured, peer review agencies differ in the extent to which high or equivalent status is preferred. Most frequently a 'suitable' mix is aimed for but the definition of suitability is itself likely to be dependent on purpose.

Professional accrediting groups in the United States select peers mainly on the basis of their professional reputation and accomplishments, and the question of achieving a 'suitable mix' of status levels arises largely in terms of type of institution or programme. A regional university offering a baccalaureate-level programme but no graduate programme, for example, would expect that visiting teams would include some persons from 'like' institutions.

Finally, particularly in internal review, peers may have managerial authority over the reviewed group. Is this supposed to be set to one side for the purposes of the review? Can this be achieved in practice? Ambiguity on this matter may pose serious problems for the legitimacy and effectiveness of the review.

The criteria used in the types of peers selected varies according to purpose of the review:

For reviews focused at the institutional level, European agencies looked for:

- academic/educational experience;
- representatives from industry and commerce without relevant subject expertise;
- management experience in higher education.

In the United States institutional accrediting generally does not include representatives from industry and commerce. In fact, the emphasis is strongly on expertise acquired at an institution of higher education. Occasionally, persons are included who are with higher education associations, especially when they have some special expertise (eg information technology, evaluation).

At the course/subject review level in Europe the main criterion used is relevant subject experience within the academic community but panels sometimes also contain subject experts from outside of higher education. Programme review in the United States gives greatest importance to relevant subject experience within the academic community but frequently includes members that represent important 'client' groups. Teacher accreditation review teams may include a school board member; teams reviewing physical therapy programmes may include a physician; peer review teams for programmes in architecture generally include practising architects and state government officials.

In the case of research, the criteria applied are:

- relevant subject expertise from within the academic community;
- relevant subject expertise but outside of the higher education sector.

Where peers are selected for their subject expertise, a medium-high priority is given to the following factors, irrespective of the type of review being undertaken:

- research reputation;
- teaching experience;
- ensuring a suitable mix of peers.

Although there is every likelihood that organisations pay especial attention to the status of peers in order to ensure that the peers selected have an equivalent reputation to the group being reviewed, the main priority/policy seems to be that a suitable mix of peers is achieved.

A related matter is the size of the peer group. Clearly, the larger the group, the greater the opportunity to use different types of peer and to achieve a 'suitable mix'. The size of the peer group for any particular review varies according to the purpose of the review (for example, institutional, course, subject or research). The norm seems to be in the range of four to ten but groups as large as twenty-four are not uncommon.

Perhaps more important than absolute size are the numbers felt necessary to assess a specialist unit, for example a course or a research proposal. Again, practice varies. In France, the CNE uses a single specialist to review a broad area of a University's work in both teaching, research and administration, for example a review of engineering or of social sciences. At the other extreme, three to five specialists are generally used by the UK research councils to comment upon a single research proposal.

What this points to is a reasonable consensus about the types of peer necessary to assess the quality of research but an almost complete absence of consensus about what is needed in the case of teaching. Even the assumption that peers should be drawn from outside of the group being reviewed does not always hold. There are cases where processes of external review become combined with processes of internal self-evaluation. Differences relate to differences in purpose and focus of review but even here there are clearly different views being taken about the balance to be drawn between disinterestedness and competence and about what constitutes the latter.

Selection of peers and quality control

Criteria of selection have been considered above. But there remain questions of who selects the peers and where from, and with what degree of formality. In some cases there is initial selection to a committee or to an approved list prior to selection for involvement in a particular activity. Another important distinction is between the power to nominate and the power to select.

Existing members of the peer group usually are able to suggest or to nominate new members. In some cases, they may influence informally who is selected for a particular review activity. In other cases, this is a decision reserved to professional administrators. Formal authority to appoint somebody to a committee or approved list is normally reserved to a parent committee. Nominations frequently come from the

broad constituency of the groups subject to review. The subject committees of the Dutch VSNU are chosen by the professors in the particular field.

In Europe, the possibility of the group under review influencing selection of peers is normally very limited and frequently non-existent. Where it exists it may suggest a limitation or decline in the powers of the review agency (eg CNAA latterly). The main exception to this is internally sponsored reviews which make use of external peers. This is partly due to knowledge (there may be no-one else in the institution who knows who the experts are) and partly due to power (ie external administrators are likely to have more power than internal ones and be better able to resist the pressures of interested parties).

In the United States, some specialised accrediting groups allow institutions to make limited challenges of peer group membership. This occurs especially in those professions that are relatively small, and thus where potential conflicts of interest arise somewhat often; it may also reflect different cultural values related to the importance of consensus and fair play. The extent of influence is limited, however: in some agencies, an institution may only challenge a potential member on narrow grounds of conflict of interest; in other agencies, an institution may voice a concern but receives no guarantees that a change will be made.

The 'pool' from which peers are sought and selected can vary in size and in openness. Formal procedures usually tap a larger pool and are more open. Informal procedures are likely to be much less open and draw from a smaller pool. However, the potential size of the pool will vary according to the criteria for selection.

Procedures for selection can have an important bearing on the legitimacy accorded to peer review. Not only should procedures ensure that only credible people are selected but that there is fairness in the selection process and equal opportunity for those eligible to be selected. In many circumstances, gender and ethnic considerations will also play a part in the latter.

Most organisations select peers by building up informal contacts and networks, but some organisations have set up or are beginning to set up their own specialist list of names. A distinctive approach is taken by the UK HEQC which requests nominations of 'auditors' from higher education institutions and selects from this pool of nominees. In addition, the HEQC advertises for auditors in the educational press. It has also become UK practice to remunerate peers. This reflects the contractual consultancy-type relationships (as opposed to peer 'ownership') of the new quality assurance and assessment arrangements in the UK.

Responsibility for the choice of peers in a particular review normally rests with a professional administrator/manager (sometimes in consultation with the chair of the panel) in all bodies that were consulted within the UK and in Hong Kong. In the Netherlands the VSNU invites the group under review to nominate peers, but the appointment of the peers is made by the VSNU. In Denmark and France steering committees appoint the peers.

A pool, or formal roster of candidates, is often used by programme accrediting agencies in the United States. Persons are nominated for the roster by their professional association; if invited to be on the roster, they must submit to some form of training and be available for a specific number of accrediting visits over a set term (eg two per year). In contrast, most United States research funding agencies use a much more informal process, relying on the judgement of programme officers for selection of peers rather than on the use of an openly developed roster. The programme officers are responsible for achieving variety in who they select, but have considerable discretion in how they do so. Similar informal processes regarding research have been the norm until now in the United Kingdom but research councils are beginning to compile extensive databases of experts.

It is in the selection of peers that the existence of effective procedural safeguards can be vital to the credibility and acceptability of the peer review process. It is not just a matter of obtaining the right sort of expertise. It is also important to

ensure that extraneous interests are not brought to bear. Ideally peers should be drawn from the total relevant constituency (eg all institutions subject to review), reflect sub-specialisms in the discipline and different paradigms within it. Age, gender and seniority all need to be considered. Informal networks and relationships between peers need to be detected and taken into account.

Referring to the distinction made earlier between making judgements and taking decisions (eg about funding) based on them, it is probably the case that there is greater formality (ie procedural safeguards) when decisions are required. There are generally clear procedures for appointing someone to a decision-making committee, whereas the selection of people for specific review activities is usually much more ad hoc. Some agencies have a 'pool' or 'register' of reviewers while others, eg the French CNE, reject such an approach because of the danger of creating a class of 'professional' peers. Genuine peers, according to this view, should be practising academics with no special connection with the review agency.

Related to questions of selection are questions of removal, appraisal and training. Many agencies appoint peers for a fixed period of time. In a few cases, a 'probationary' period has to be served. Where selection is ad hoc and review specific, these issues do not arise.

In the case of research organisations, the peer reviewers do not receive any kind of formal training for the task, but are provided with general guidelines on what is expected of them. The professional bodies do not have any formal training in place either, but have strict policy documents/guidelines that need to be followed.

The national bodies reviewing individual programmes, courses, or whole institutions usually have formal training sessions for the peers. These range from:

- a plenary meeting (before visit)
- appointment as 'observers' on panels before being used as full participants

- briefing documents
- seminars/workshops
- induction meetings (eg in the case of the HEQC a three-stage induction lasting approximately one week)

There is no formal evaluation of the performance of the reviewers. Informally this is done by the administrators organising visits and by feedback following visits. In the Netherlands the inspectorate interviews both the chairman of the panel and the co-ordinator.

Aims and focus of review

The scope of peer review differs sharply among the settings in this study. At its broadest, it refers to the activities of an entire institution (eg CNE in France; institutional accrediting in the United States). In the United States, this includes a review of such areas as student housing polices, intercollegiate athletics programmes, admissions and fund-raising, and library operations. In other situations, an academic programme can be the focus but even then the mandate can be quite broad, eg reviewing all of an institution's social science work or, reviewing a number of teacher preparation programmes. Instead, programme review can be as narrow as a single course or academic programme. A programme review sometimes includes research and teaching accomplishments. At other times — at least as far as external agencies are involved — it is limited to one or the other. In the United States the general model is a combined one.

In the case of research, the review is based on either a proposed programme (for new applications) or a completed programme of work. The predominant pattern is one of reviewing statements of proposed research. Most research funding agencies in the United States also operate some programmes that offer support for a coherent set of research projects focused on particular national objectives (eg cancer research, development of a space station, defence-related research). Such programmes, which have elaborate review procedures, are beyond the scope of the present study.

Where teaching or study programmes are the focus, attention may be concentrated on student attainments, on curricula and other aspects of course organisation, or on institutional procedures for assuring quality.

When a review is at the course/programme level, the primary aims of the review is a combination of the following:

- ensuring that threshold quality requirements are met; and
- assisting those being reviewed to improve the quality of their work.

There is a particularly strong emphasis on meeting threshold quality requirements.

The emphasis would however depend on the age and health of the course/institution concerned. In established institutions, concern may be directed at the institution's procedures for quality assessment — rather than its quality per se — and the likelihood that the institution will deliver good quality programmes in the future. The audit procedures of the UK Higher Education Quality Council take this approach. The aim is to assess whether an institution's systems and procedures for maintaining and enhancing academic quality meet its declared aims and objectives, and that they work effectively.

In Denmark, comparisons of quality between institutions are also made, and the UK Funding Councils make comparative judgements in assessing quality in both teaching and research.

The subject/professional bodies primarily focus on ensuring that threshold quality requirements are met, as do both the research bodies consulted in Germany and the UK. However, in the case of research assessment, the distinction between the assessment process and the decision-making process needs to be made. Some element of comparison or ranking is almost inevitable in the latter.

Another way of looking at focus is whether the emphasis of assessment is on intentions, achievements or procedures. For

many kinds of academic activity, information about intentions, resources, and procedures is more readily available than information about achievements. Many programme accrediting agencies in the United States have adopted a 'competency-based' approach, in which both the programmes and the criteria used for evaluating them are focused on behaviours or competences that students and graduates must demonstrate. This development is, in large part, a response to the decades-long debates that have taken place about the relative inadequacy of focusing evaluations on the more readily available information on 'inputs' or resources.

Another contributing factor is the 'applied' nature of most programmes that are subject to specialised accrediting review. Along with teaching, this includes many health professions as well as performing arts fields. Accrediting teams for architecture programmes, for example, focus much of their attention on the numerous 'exhibits' of student work that are gathered for their review; the programme is required to display examples of student work that reflect what is judged to be 'minimally acceptable' and 'highly acceptable' for each of fifty-six performance-based criteria.

A somewhat similar response adopted by other programme accrediting agencies and by most institutional accrediting agencies in the United States during the last decade has been to supplement requests for information about resources with requests for some form of 'outcomes' information that describes student attainment in greater detail than had been previously required. Sometimes specific requirements are given; at other times the programme or institution is expected to document that it has a procedure to assess outcomes and to implement programme changes based on assessment results.

Programme accrediting in the United States typically follows quite detailed and specific evaluative criteria. Reviews of programmes in physical therapy, for example, are based on more than forty specific evaluative criteria, covering the programme's organisation, resources, curriculum, and the performance of programme graduates. With this approach, the

peer review process is based on reporting whether or not the programme is in compliance with each of the evaluative criteria.

There has so far been little attempt in Europe to bring the outcomes of student assessment directly to bear on programme assessment other than in the very general sense of looking at completion rates. This has led critics to complain that quality assessment is excessively concerned with procedures and intentions, or even documentation.

Methods of review

A crucial issue here is whether reviews involve face-to-face contact between reviewer and reviewed. Where it does not, much can be hidden from the reviewed, including even the identity of the reviewers. Identities are most frequently hidden when the object of review is personal — refereeing individual research proposals or articles for publication.

Most peer review processes for research proposals protect the identity of the reviewer; however, the proposer has the right to receive copies of review comments and ratings (identifying information is removed or obscured, but comments may be hand-written and, thus, susceptible to indirect recognition).

There is also a question of face-to-face contact between reviewers. This provides possibilities of exchange of information and views and of genuinely 'collective' decision-making. The presence and role of any administrator is also relevant here. Where there is no such contact between reviewers, differences in judgement may be arbitrated by a professional administrator.

Many reviews of research proposals are based on written evaluations prepared by individual reviewers working alone; often, no two reviewers see exactly the same set of proposals; nor do they know the name of other persons who reviewed any particular proposal. Some divisions within the National Science Foundation (in the United States) operate a two-tier review system, with anonymous reviewers who send in comments but do not meet together and then, as a second stage, a panel of

reviewers is convened (eg twice a year) to offer advice based on discussion and comparison of fifty or more proposals that have been reviewed. Similar two-stage procedures are found elsewhere.

Some accrediting agencies in the United States have an administrator of the accrediting agency participate in all peer visits. Among those agencies that have a multi-layered review process, the review team sometimes includes a member of the board or commission that will receive and act on the team's report.

As far as processes of peer review of institutions or programmes are concerned, many agencies follow a three stage model of the kind described by Marjorie Peace Lenn in her description of accreditation in the United States.

> "A common pattern used by both institutional and specialised accrediting bodies includes (i) a rigorous and candid self-study by the institution or programme, examining and evaluating objectives, activities, and achievements; (ii) an on-site visit by a team of peers who provide expert evaluation and offer suggestions for improvement; and (iii) a subsequent review and decision by a central governing commission or board." (Peace Lenn, 1992)

The major element is generally regarded as the site visit which may last between one and four days. It may also be spread over several months with reviewers making several visits to different parts of the programme or institution. There appears to be no single pattern to the organisation of visits. Certainly, a lot of time will be devoted to discussions between academic staff and the review group. But practice varies in how much time is devoted to observing teaching or examining student work and discussions with staff vary according to whether they occur in groups or individually. Professional bodies are the most likely to examine student work.

Visits also differ in terms of how much freedom the reviewers have over their programme and agenda. In some cases, most

things will have been pre-arranged between administrators of the agency and administrators of the institutions. Much depends on how far, if at all, the review group has been involved in the review before the visit takes place. Lack of prior involvement severely limits the powers of the reviewers to set the visit agenda.

The complexity of programme structures and the internal organisation of institutions often leads to 'multi-layered' reviews. Complexity of decision-making comes with multi-layered approaches to peer review. Thus, advice from subject experts may feed into decisions of a committee with a multi-subject composition. Such arrangements may help resolve tensions between competence and disinterestedness. Much more complex are course reviews and approval decisions which may start with self-review by course team members and move through faculty and institutional layers of review to be followed by review by an external agency, which itself might be multi-layered. All stages of the process might be properly regarded as peer review whilst taking very different forms and foci.

As well as discussions and observations, all forms of peer review are heavily dependent on documentation supplied by the institution. In the case of research, both the UK ESRC and the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG) in Germany always request specially prepared documentation from those being reviewed, and the ESRC always carries out a site visit when applications for the establishment of a research centre are made, but rarely visits in the case of individual projects and programmes. In Germany, site visits and inspection of work are only occasionally carried out.

Both at the subject/professional body level and the national agencies carrying out either course/programme or institutional review, specially prepared documentation is always used for first/new reviews and existing documentation for progress reviews.

The issue of documentation is frequently a source of disagreement between institutions and quality assessment agencies. The latter frequently claim to have minimised their

documentation requirements and to prefer to work with existing institutional documents created for other purposes. In practice, institutions generally devote a considerable amount of time and effort to the preparation of documents and to the gathering of information to support the review process.

A final issue of method is the vital but complex issue of 'ethos'. Is the dialogue between peers confrontational or supportive? Does it have a cutting edge or is it a bland exchange of compliments? Of course, policy and intentions may be at variance with experience in this as in much else. Much should, and probably does, depend on the purposes of the review, whether summative or formative. But an additional factor may be the confidence and the powers of the review agency. Where these are seen to be weak or on the wane, a more collaborative or partnership approach may be the norm (for example, the final years of the CNAA).

Reportage

Is there an oral report of the review? Is there a written report? If a written report, how extensive? The report is the lasting outcome of the review and, depending on its dissemination, may be used for various purposes, including purposes other than those originally intended. The nature of the report and the way it is produced represent, therefore, crucial aspects of the peer review process.

The production of a report is usually mainly, and often exclusively, the responsibility of the review group plus administrative assistance. Where practice does vary is in the opportunities given to those under review to make pre-publication comment on either points of factual accuracy or substantive conclusions. The CNE appears to be unique in publishing an institutional response as part of its own report. In cases where opportunities to comment are given, they may be given only to management representatives or to the academic group under review.

In Europe, practices on publication of reports vary widely. Three main possibilities exist:

(i) publication and wide dissemination of whole report (CNE);

(ii) no publication at all (DFG); and,

between the two extremes,

(iii) limited circulation of whole or part of the report to targeted groups.

Despite some criticism from external groups, most United States accrediting agencies do not publish reports from peer review visits. Most send the full report to the institution or programme being reviewed, and consider it their document to release or not. For most, the only public information following a review is an official statement about the programme's accreditation status. Some publish and make available a summary document. The accrediting agency for teacher education, for example, publishes an "action report" that includes a summary of what standards were met (and not met) by the programme that was reviewed; it also describes any weaknesses that were cited.

Publication policies should reflect the audience for which the report is written. Again, three main possibilities appear to exist:

(i) the commissioning agency/the review group;

(ii) the institution/group under review;

(iii) the wider academic community and other publics (eg students, 'employers etc).

The third option (wide dissemination) is the exception in the United States.

Who the report is written for will reflect purpose and determine content. A report written for specific decision-makers will need to contain clear recommendations and the evidence on which they are made. It will reflect a summative purpose. A report written for a group under review will need to provide feed-back and explanation and be relevant to the group's future plans. A

report written for wide circulation is likely to be heavily descriptive, relatively non-technical and circumspect in its criticisms. Many reports will need to address several purposes and speak to many different audiences.

The reports prepared as part of most peer reviews for United States accrediting agencies are written with two audiences in mind: first, they are a report to the agency (or, sometimes, its board or standing commission), offering a summary of the peer body's fact-finding process. Just as important, however, they are usually seen as a report to the institution, one that is designed to offer advice as well as evaluation. A summary report includes descriptive sections that describe factually what was found regarding each of the agency's formal accrediting standards or criteria. Typically, the report also includes a summary statement that organises its comments around strengths and weaknesses (or concerns) emerging from the visit. In some cases, but not in others, the report includes recommendations.

When multi-layered reviews are involved, the peer review report often is a fact-finding document and does not make recommendations. The programme reviews in the United States for physical therapy, for example, result in reports that cite strengths and weaknesses for each of more than forty standards and, where necessary, indicate that insufficient information was available for making a judgement. Its standing commission treats the peer review report as factual information for its own review and judgement. The commission will also review, as further information, any written statement that the programme administrators chose to make in response to the peer review report. In an unusual procedure designed to help inform the commission's discussion, two members of the commission are assigned to be formal reviewers of each programme/report scheduled to come before the commission; these two reviewers are responsible for a careful review of the full report and related documentation and each must prepare a formal summary, with findings, that becomes part of the documentation coming to the full commission.

The administrators normally prepare the report in consultation with the members of the peer review panel. Exceptions to this

are the UK HEQC in whose case the auditors undertake this task, and the UK funding councils where the reviewers prepare the report.

In the United States, accrediting review reports are generally written by the peer review team. Sometimes, the chairman of the team drafts the report; more often, team members take responsibility for particular sections. For reviewers of research proposals, individual reviewers generally fill out reviewer questionnaires or forms to evaluate each proposal; sometimes, the programme officer at the agency then prepares a summary; just as often, the individual comment sheets are assembled without any summary.

The reviewed group is sent a draft copy and allowed to comment on the factual accuracy and any substantive conclusions reached. The one exception to this is the DFG which invites no comment on its reports. United States practice generally is to allow comments about factual accuracy. Sometimes the draft report will be revised accordingly; for other agencies, any comments become part of the reporting. In all cases (research level, programme/course level, institution level, professional body) the final draft is subject to the agreement of the members of the peer group.

Is the report a public document? In Germany a DFG report is not a public document, nor is there any publication of the main recommendations. Only the decision-making committee is allowed to see it. In the ESRC there is variation as to whether it is a public document, but if not then the main recommendations are always published. In the subject/professional bodies the report is not public, nor are the recommendations published.

With the exception of the VSNU in the Netherlands, national bodies reviewing institutions and courses publish the report. But the VSNU sends the report to the institution concerned and the report may be published at the discretion of the institution.

IV Problems of peer review and implications for further research

The widespread use of peer review in evaluating higher education can disguise the considerable variation that exists in the methods employed. Variations in method relate in part to differences in purpose and context. In particular, there are three contextual factors which, taken together, may be central to the problems of achieving effective peer review in higher education. The first factor is the increased *diversity* of higher education, the second, and related, factor is the growing range of *stakeholders* in higher education, and the third factor is the growth of *managerialism*.

Diversity

As we have seen, the moral authority of peer review is in large part based on *shared values* of the peer community. These have been at their strongest in traditional subject groups (Becher, 1992). But today there may be a breakdown of consensus as institutional missions compete with subject conventions as a basis for course design. Courses reflect the greater variety of functions and clients that are to be found in mass systems of higher education. External peers may not share nor even understand the mission-related context in which *their* subject is being offered in a particular institution. Instead of shared values underpinning the legitimacy of peer judgements, a conflict of values may make such judgements unacceptable to those who receive them.

Moreover, as more of the higher education curriculum is organised in multi- and inter-disciplinary forms, the shared values of subject communities become both less important in the planning and design of the curriculum and less relevant to its evaluation. A further manifestation of this is when externally set curriculum categories fail to match onto the curriculum organisation of a particular institution. For example, an

institution offering integrated humanities programmes may have to create a history programme which is little more than an artificial construct in order to meet the requirements of external review.

However, as the practice of several of the quality assurance agencies reviewed in this study has revealed, it is possible to employ a much wider conception of "peer" than shared membership of a subject community. And it is certainly the case that there have traditionally been shared values within the academic community which transcend subject boundaries. It must still be questioned, however, whether such values survive everywhere in the more diverse institutional and programmatic forms of mass higher education.

Even if sufficient value consensus can still be found, the absence of shared disciplinary values and competences must have major consequences for the focus of peer review. Broadly-based peer groups generally forego the 'right' to comment on the appropriateness and relevance of curriculum content and instead concentrate on more general pedagogic issues of teaching and assessment. As a recent review of the quality assessment method employed by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) has pointed out, such a focus tends to exclude discussion of the substance of courses for more organisational and pedagogic issues (Barnett, 1994). A lack of subject competence may also be associated with another of the things frequently criticised: the blandness of assessment reports which might, in part at least, be ascribed to the lack of confidence (and authority) of their authors to enter into specific disciplinary discussion and evaluation.

The problems of diversity in higher education are also the problems of mass higher education but the latter brings with it additional difficulties. A greater proportion of academic staff will be excluded from and remote from the *reviewer* role. Transparency will be more difficult to achieve. Informal communication will be less effective. And insofar as resources are more scarce, more may hinge on the outcomes of review.

The problems of diversity and of mass are primarily problems associated with evaluation of the teaching or education function of higher education. Competition for research funding is likely to concern a minority of academic staff. Research can more confidently be assessed in terms of universalistic subject-based criteria. There was relatively little variation in methods between the agencies concerned with research assessment. However, in Europe at least, the external assessment of education — still a relatively recent phenomenon and with rather different purposes and contexts in different countries — has certainly yet to evolve standard and accepted procedures.

Of the variations in practice revealed by this study, two aspects stand out as important in taking account of diversity. The first of these is *matching*, ie of selecting peers who share the background and, to some extent the purposes, of groups under review. The second is *explicitness*: of criteria and of values. If shared values cannot be assumed, then values should at least be made explicit. This is less a matter of agencies providing guidelines than reviewers being open about the criteria they are using in practice.

A more fundamental response to the problem of diversity in higher education is diversity of evaluation agencies. Van Vught has proposed for Europe the creation of multiple accreditation agencies, operating across national borders, reflecting differences in educational mission and representing different stakeholder interests. It seems unlikely, however, that such arrangements would meet the needs either of governments — for greater control over higher education — or of institutions, many of whom would be faced with a need to seek accreditation from *several* agencies, in order to reflect internal diversity.

Stakeholders

Emphasis on public accountability, competition and consumers increases the diversity of stakeholders in higher education, ie groups with competing claims to power and authority. The claims of stakeholders are relevant to the discussion of peer

review precisely because the authority of the subject community is no longer sufficient in the eyes of external constituencies. The community of academics has become *one* player, not *the* player who is holding authority.

If the balance of power has shifted, the question now may be whether the traditional sources of power can accommodate to new realities. In this context, the best that academics may be able to achieve is to continue to be a key player in the game, perhaps the primary player or source of authority.

Thus, the new direction for peer review may include a partial shift to a broadened concept of "expert review". Rather than "peer review", narrowly defined, the experts now include persons from within the subject community but also persons who represent other stakeholders. In the United States context, with programme accrediting groups, this process of broadening the concept of "expert" has taken the form of including practising professionals on site visits and on boards. It also involves, in some instances, inclusion of a student or a member of the public. In some recent discussions about a new organisation to replace COPA (the Council on Postsecondary Accreditation, which was disbanded in December 1993), proposals about its board membership have included suggestions that corporate executives may be asked to join the board.

Similar trends are evident in Europe, in terms both of the composition of visiting groups and in their controlling boards and committees. In relation to the latter, the UK government indicated that the steering committee of the quality audit process undertaken by the Higher Education Quality Council should "have industrial and professional as well as academic members" (DES, 1991). The Council obliged and has set up a steering committee chaired by an industrialist.

Under this broadened concept of peer review, the sources of expertise are more varied and the focus of the review will reflect the wider range of stakeholder interests. But the general principle is retained that there is a body of specialised knowledge that must be relied upon in order to reach a good

judgement, and this specialised knowledge is of such a complexity that it is best brought forward by the exercise of judgement, not by any objective scoring, weighting or voting process.

The broadening of peer review to represent a wider range of stakeholder interests seems inevitably to widen the evaluative criteria that will be applied. This, and the greater diversity *within* higher education already alluded to, brings with it a requirement for greater explicitness of criteria in use. The logic of this may be to move in the direction of outcomes assessment, to a focus on results, the assessable skills and competences that are to be achieved. American accrediting agencies are now at this point, in which they are recognising the necessity of such a focus. (A separate issue is the *difficulty* of achieving an outcomes approach. In both Europe and the United States, policy objectives in an outcomes direction have frequently failed to be fully implemented.)

However, a key point for the continuing credibility of the peer review process is that expectations have shifted and that part of the expectations is for explicit criteria which focus on assessable outcomes. To the extent that peer review processes remain focused on documentable, available processes and on such laudable "inputs" as scholarly publications, external constituencies will remain impatient with the results of peer review. The key questions — in the eyes of the external stakeholders — are not being answered.

Managerialism

External assessment of higher education cannot be divorced from methods of decision-making, both within individual institutions and at system level. At both levels, traditional forms of collegiality are frequently held to be under threat by a growing managerialism.

Changes in methods of decision-making have consequences for the processes which inform decisions. Decisions informed by

peer review processes may increasingly be taken outside the peer group, by administrators or by managers. Peers may have little control over, or even knowledge of, the consequences of their judgements. This may be both a strength — supporting integrity and objectivity — and a weakness, in the sense that it might lessen the commitment of peers and reduce the transparency of the overall assessment process.

As many academics don managerial roles for a substantial part of their working time, the potential for ambiguity and misunderstanding is considerable. In short, the distinction between 'moral' and 'bureaucratic' authority becomes confused. Although most academics are perfectly able to separate the various roles they play, the appearance to others may be less clear-cut. This is another area where explicitness can be valuable and procedural safeguards can be introduced to enforce distinctiveness of role.

Related to managerialism is the market context in which many higher education institutions must now operate. Managed increasingly as businesses, institutions must, as we have already noted, take account of the interests and views of a wide variety of 'stakeholders'. Where the authority of peers, whether moral or bureaucractic, is confronted by the "purchasing power" of customers, commercial considerations may dictate that it is the latter who are "empowered". There may be long-term versus short-term considerations here in that long-term institutional credibility may be more dependent on peer reputation whereas short-term survival may require attention to immediate customer preference.

The views and judgements of different stakeholders can of course be combined. Students, employers, funding agencies and peers can inform the views of each other through their own judgements, where these are made public. However, the balance of power between stakeholders will be shaped ultimately by funding regimes imposed by governments. The introduction of any kind of market is likely to lessen the direct power of peer groups, although not necessarily their influence.

Peer review and self-evaluation

This report has been primarily about the use of peer review in *external* quality assessment. An interesting extension of its use is *within* institutions as part of processes of self-evaluation or assessment. In such cases, peers are unlikely to be subject specialists but are drawn from the broader academic community of the institution. The advantage of such an arrangement is that knowledge of institutional mission and context will be high. But, in general, such arrangements seem unlikely to achieve credibility either in terms of *competence* or in terms of *disinterestedness*, the former due to lack of subject expertise and the latter due to competitiveness within the institution.

A variation on the above is when self-evaluation makes use of external experts. This arrangement increases substantially perceived competence and disinterestedness, providing there are sufficient procedural safeguards in the selection and briefing of the external peers. The combination of internal and external peers may provide the best means of taking account of institutional mission and context while preserving the reference point and authority of an external standard.

Most American universities and colleges now rely on procedures of programme review, a regular cycle of internal reviews in which academic programmes prepare a self-evaluation that is submitted for wider review; in some cases, external visitors also offer comments on the programme. Under such procedures, subject-matter expertise remains the primary basis for evaluative judgements, but the wider institutional context is considered as well.

Effectiveness of peer review

In examining some of the variations in the practice of peer review as used by national agencies in Europe and the United States, this study has not been concerned with assessing their effectiveness or impact. Several purposes of peer review have been identified but we have not examined whether purposes have been achieved, nor whether there have been unintended

consequences. In view of the increasing importance that is being attached to peer review as a means of regulating academic work, questions of impact and effectiveness must surely be raised.

One set of questions would relate to whether formal purposes are being achieved. Thus,

in respect of improvement: does peer review lead to clear recommendations for action? are the actions subsequently taken and what are their consequences?

in respect of threshold quality: is action taken in respect of identified problems? is it successful? do external stakeholders know about it? are they satisfied? do groups within the institution agree with the prognosis?

in respect of comparative quality: are rankings etc accepted by the academic and institutional communities? how do they affect the actions of stakeholders? are resource allocation or other decisions based on them regarded as legitimate by the academic community?

in respect of standards: does peer review lead to better outcomes than other, possibly less cumbersome, methods of evaluation?

A second set of questions concerns whether there are unintended consequences arising from peer review processes. Unintended consequences might include:

- an increase in co-operation and 'solidarity' among academics taking part in the peer review process;
- greater dissemination of information about academic developments;
- a change in decision-making and professional roles within institutions;
- greater homogeneity of educational programmes.

If the considerable variations in the practice of peer review recorded above have real consequences, then it follows that the impact and effectiveness of peer review will differ between

agencies. Therefore, a continued need for *comparative* study of peer review appears to be warranted. Few countries have a sufficiently wide range of peer review agencies to be able to undertake effective comparative studies within the country. Cross-national studies provide a solution.

Cross-national approaches are also a potential solution to another, little-discussed, problem of peer review: the small country problem. In countries which possess only one or two higher education institutions, the human resources necessary to ensure the integrity of peer review will not be present. The solution — language permitting — is to seek peers from outside the country.

Several quality assessment agencies in Europe are making use of peers from other countries. Small countries are more likely to do so than large. But in that there is no such thing as 'local science', it may be that some internationalisation of peer review processes represents a significant strengthening of the method. It has long been a feature of the refereeing process of international journals and may do much to increase perceived competence and disinterestedness, and thereby legitimacy, of peer review.

Finally, we have referred to the "classic model" of peer review as used in research. It is worth noting how few of the elements of this model have been carried into the assessment of education. Key features of peer review of research which are *not* usually characteristic of assessment of education are:

- close "matching" of subject specialists
- focus on prospective work rather than previous accomplishment
- no face-to-face dialogue
- anonymity of reviewers
- limited feed-back

Research *is* different. It employs more universalistic criteria and standards, although this can be over-emphasised in some subject

fields. On the whole, the peer review of research is granted greater legitimacy than the equivalent processes in education.

Should then peer review of education follow more closely the more established practices in research? The difficulty is that legitimacy is not necessarily the same thing as effectiveness. Peer review has been described as the 'least bad' method of research assessment. In the absence of studies of the impact and effectiveness of peer review, perhaps more consideration should be given by assessment agencies whose focus is education to the methods employed in the assessment of research.

52

Appendix I

List of organisations which participated in the study

Europe

Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work (CCETSW): the accrediting body for all courses in the area of social work in the UK. Its central role is the setting, maintenance and improvement of standards in the area.

Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA): the quality assurance and awarding body for degrees and other higher education qualifications in UK polytechnics and colleges. As a result of government legislation, the CNAA was abolished in March 1993 and polytechnics were granted university status.

Open University Validation Services (OUVS): accredits non-university institutions (including some from commerce/industry and abroad) and the programmes of study they provide which lead to validated awards of the Open University. OUVS accredits some colleges that were previously validated by the CNAA.

Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC): has responsibility for the maintenance and improvement of quality in all UK universities. Through its Division of Quality Audit, the HEQC has responsibility for undertaking (on a five to seven year review cycle) institutional academic quality audits.

Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE): distributes funds made available by the government for the provision of teaching and undertaking of research in higher education institutions in England. The HEFCE also has

responsibility for the assessment of the quality of teaching and research programmes and this assessment influences funding decisions.

Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC): UK government-funded agency which grants funds for undertaking research in the area of social sciences.

Institution of Mechanical Engineers, Institution of Civil Engineers and the Institution of Electrical Engineers: professional engineering accrediting bodies which, in conjunction with the universities, are responsible for moderating courses of study in order that they meet the higher educational qualifications which students require for gaining corporate membership of the Institutions.

Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG), Germany: grants funds for scientific research in all fields, including the humanities.

Comité National d'Evaluation (CNE), France: is responsible for the assessment of the quality of both teaching and management of all universities.

Association of Universities (VSNU), The Netherlands: has responsibility for co-ordinating all external quality assessment at the programme level in Dutch universities.

Centre for Quality Assurance and Evaluation of Higher Education, Denmark: has responsibility for the evaluation of programmes of study at degree level and the evaluation, in conjunction with the research councils, of research activity.

United States of America

New England Association of Schools and Colleges: a regional accrediting agency for institutions that award one or two year degrees, bachelor's , master's or doctorate degrees. Principally located in Connecticut, Maine, Massachussetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island and Vermont.

American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business: a specialised accrediting body for baccalaureate and master's degree programmes in business administration and management, and in accounting.

Commission on Accreditation in Physical Therapy Education, American Physical Therapy Association: accredits physical therapist assistant programmes at the associate degree level, and physical therapist programmes at the baccalaureate, post-baccalaureate certificate, and master's degree levels.

Council on Education for Public Health: accredits graduate schools of public health and graduate programmes outside schools of public health in community health education and community health/preventive medicine.

National Architectural Accrediting Board: accredits bachelor's and master's degree programmes in architecture.

National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education: accredits units within institutions offering professional education programmes at the basic and advanced levels.

National Science Foundation: a Federal agency of the US government that promotes research and science education in the natural sciences and engineering.

Hong Kong

Hong Kong Council for Academic Accreditation (HKCAA): has responsibility for advising the Hong Kong government on the academic standards of polytechnics and other higher education institutions and the degree courses they offer. It achieves this by the process of academic accreditation.

To give an idea of the range and type of institutions approached, appendices II to IV give more detailed information on the DFG in Germany, the CNE in France, and the National Architectural Accrediting Board in the USA.

Appendix II

Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG), Germany

The DFG is a grant-giving organisation for scientific research in all fields. In terms of legal status, it is a private organisation but it receives all of its funding from public bodies. For example, in 1989 sixty per cent of its funds came from the Federal government and forty per cent from the eleven provinces that made up the Federal Republic of Germany at that time. The members of DFG are individual universities, academies of science, and national research institutes.

The annual research spending by the DFG is allocated as follows:

- fifty per cent to individual unsolicited self-initiated projects, the proposals for which are in the main dealt with by correspondence which involves two or more peers independently reviewing each application and presenting their comments in writing;
- thirty per cent to over 160 university research centres which are reviewed by site visits every three years;
- twenty per cent to solicited self-initiated projects in co-operative research programmes which are reviewed by a panel.

Approximately 10,000 research project applications are received by the DFG per annum. From its predecessor, the Notgemeinschaft der Deutschen Wissenschaft (founded in 1920), the DFG has inherited peer review as the method for considering all research project applications.

The DFG presently has 459 elected reviewers organised in 36 panels with 176 disciplinary sub-groups. The panel structure

(including the voting rights and the criteria for the nomination of candidates) is reviewed every four years.

Nominations for the reviewers are invited from learned societies and elections take place every four years by secret ballot. Active voting rights are held by all PhD holders who have undertaken research for three years after gaining the PhD in universities, national laboratories and other designated research centres, but excluding industry.

The DFG regards peer review as the basis for its activity in promoting research in the universities. Peer review is seen as being particularly congenial to DFG because for an independent, self-governing organisation whose members are (mostly) the institutions in which basic and strategic research is carried out, it is natural that it should base decisions on expert advice focusing on criteria of scientific merit.

The DFG's electoral process is seen as providing legitimacy in a way which reviewer selection by programme officers alone could not attain.

Appendix III

Comité National D'Evaluation (CNE), France

The Comité National d'Evaluation (CNE) was established in 1984, and began operating in 1986, to carry out institutional quality assessment of higher education in France. It is an independent authority and reports directly to the President and Parliament of the country.

The CNE is responsible for evaluating each higher education institution and the value of the "public service" it provides, mainly scientific research, initial and continued training, and the development of an institution in its socio-economic and cultural context. The Comité also examines the governance of each of the institutions. It has no responsibility for the overall management of the higher education system nor for its funding.

The CNE comprises seventeen members representing the scientific and academic communities, and the main state jurisdictions (the Conseil d'Etat, the Cour des Comptes and the Conseil Economique et Social). The Comité has a general secretariat with permanent staff and extensive autonomy in managing its own affairs.

The quality assessment method of the CNE is founded on several essential principles:

- *Internal (self) assessment* is seen as fundamental and the Comité issues a questionnaire which serves as a guideline to the institution in completing the self-assessment "dossier". This dossier is completed at two levels — central administration and faculty — and comprises both quantitative and qualitative elements.

- *External assessment* by peers which is seen as giving credibility to the process of institutional assessment. Eighty per cent of the peers are university professors or researchers and the remainder are from the business sector or from abroad.
- A *public report* is produced for each assessment visit undertaken by the CNE.

The quality assessment of each institution lasts approximately one year and is conducted in five phases.

1) *Preparation*: once a decision is taken to assess the quality of an institution, staff of the Comité who are responsible for co-ordinating the visit meet with the staff in the institution preparing the internal quality assessment report.

2) *Internal (self) quality assessment*: the institution completes the "dossier". After a preliminary analysis of the data, a delegation from the Comité visits the institution. This delegation comprises the President of the Comité, the two Comité members responsible for co-ordinating the visit, the secretary general and the section head.

3) *Expert appraisals by peers*: an average of twelve experts undertake a site visit of the institution. This visit lasts for two days. The experts make a confidential report to the Comité. Before and after the expert appraisals, the peers themselves meet with the two members of the Comité co-ordinating the visit and the section head.

4) *Drafting of the quality assessment report*: drawing on the report of the expert appraisals, a primary draft of the quality assessment report is prepared and presented to the general meeting of the Comité. The draft report is then sent to the university for comment.

5) *Publication of the report*: once a final draft of the report has been endorsed by the Comité, it is sent to the Head of the institution for a response in writing from the institution. This response is included at the end of the report. An average of 900 copies of the report are printed, 800 of which are circulated immediately.

Appendix IV

National Architectural Accrediting Board (NAAB), USA

The National Architectural Accrediting Board (NAAB) is responsible for accreditation of professional degree programmes in architecture, both at the bachelor's and master's degree levels. It accredits professional programmes within schools of architecture, not the schools themselves.

Since 1982, the NAAB has adopted an accreditation procedure based on achievement-oriented performance criteria. A school is responsible for seeing that each graduate completes a liberal studies requirement and attains the necessary achievement for fifty-six criteria, organised into four major areas: fundamental knowledge, design, communication, and practice. Documentation must include evidence that the programme provides the opportunity for students to satisfy each criterion and evidence that all students have satisfied each criterion.

The NAAB is a corporation with a Board of Directors comprised of eleven members representing the American Institute of Architecture, the National Council of Architectural Registration Boards, the Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture, the American Institute of Architecture Students, and the public. Through its membership the NAAB incorporates a broad and inclusive view of architecture. In addition, the members and their organisations bring different perspectives to bear on the accreditation process. These form the background against which the criteria and procedures have been drawn to evaluate the first professional degree education.

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Other QSC Publications

Higher Education Digest

A regular compilation of information about recent higher education developments. *Annual subscription (three issues) £16.50, overseas £19.00.*

Higher education is changing rapidly — not only in the UK but all over the world. Reading the *Higher Education Digest* is an effective means of keeping up-to-date and informed about new developments and issues which affect higher education. Since the first issue in 1987, the *Digest* has become one of the most widely read publications by academics, administrators and managers within higher education. It is also of interest to people in other sectors of education, in industry and in government who wish to keep abreast of the latest higher education developments.

Each issue contains over 50 items, ranging from general educational policy to developments within specific disciplines. Items are grouped under general themes such as:

- quality assurance
- teaching, learning and assessment
- curriculum development
- staff development
- policy and funding
- recent statistics
- international developments

It also contains details of forthcoming conferences.

Questions of Quality: in Europe and Beyond, QSC Higher Education Report No. 1, John Brennan and Frans van Vught, October 1993, price £7.50.

This report contains two papers which examine international aspects of quality in higher education from contrasting perspectives.

The first paper entitled 'Higher education quality: a European dimension' is by John Brennan, Head of the Quality Support Centre. It looks at the various 'needs' and 'opportunities' for higher education institutions to be active in Europe and the implications for quality which they raise. It goes on to review the results of recent studies of the comparative quality of educational programmes in several European countries.

The second paper is entitled 'Towards a general model of quality assessment in higher education', by Frans van Vught, Director of the Centre for Higher Education Policy Studies at the Dutch University of Twente. It examines the various systems of quality assessment and assurance which have been developed in North America and Western Europe and, out of them, sets out a general model of quality assessment in higher education.

Managerialism and the Academic Profession: Quality and Control, QSC Higher Education Report No 2, 1994, Professor Martin Trow, price £7.50.

In this report, Professor Martin Trow presents a critique of the new arrangements for the external assessment of teaching and research established following the publication of the 1991 White Paper *Higher Education: A New Framework*.

Professor Trow argues that the new arrangements are deeply flawed, that they seriously misunderstand the nature of teaching and learning in higher education, and that they are potentially damaging to the future maintenance and enhancement of the quality of British higher education. He cites them as examples of a new form of 'hard managerialism' being introduced into British higher education. The report makes proposals for alternative approaches to the maintenance and enhancement of quality in higher education.

The report also contains a response to Professor Trow's argument by Paul Clark, Director of the Quality Assessment Division at the Higher Education Funding Council for England.

Professor Trow is Professor of Public Policy at the Graduate School of Public Policy, University of California at Berkeley. He has published many books and articles on higher education policy.

Quality and Europe: Papers presented at a conference held in London on 29 November 1993, forthcoming, Greta Bradley and Brenda Little (Eds).

These papers are from a conference organised by QSC on the theme "Quality and Europe".

Three main issues underlay the conference theme, viz: the mutual recognition of qualifications and periods of study to facilitate student and graduate mobility within Europe; the importance of foreign language competence in breaking down economic and cultural barriers within the Community; and the development of a European dimension in higher education.

The aim of the conference was to explore UK experience of these developments to date, to take stock of difficulties and successes encountered, and to be mindful of ways forward for the future. These issues are dealt with in varying degrees in the papers and, interestingly, with a degree of complementarity between papers.

The overview paper by the editors not only draws on the conference papers, but also on comments received from the floor and from the formal written feedback, in order to highlight those issues which had a resonance throughout the day and which seemed to indicate key pointers for the future.

Contributors include Timothy Boswell, Minister for Higher Education, Ulrich Teichler from the University of Kassel in Germany, and Elizabeth Ogden from the European Commission's Task Force for Human Resources, Education, Training and Youth.

Towards a Methodology for Comparative Quality Assessment in European Higher Education, J L Brennan, L C J Goedegebuure, T Shah, D F Westerheijden, P J M Weusthof, 1992, CNAA/QSC/OU, CHEPS, HIS, price £7.00.

This CNAA publication from 1992 has been reprinted by QSC. It examines the possibility of making reliable and valid comparisons of the quality of higher education courses in different European countries. It contains the results of a comparative study of ten economics programmes in England, Germany and The Netherlands which involved an international peer review by leading economists.

A Guide to the Changes in UK Higher Education, 1993, Quality Support Centre, price £3.00.

The Guide contains details of the Higher Education Quality Council, the Quality Assessment Divisions of the English, Scottish and Welsh Higher Education Funding Councils, a Who's Who in Quality, and a complete list of universities and colleges in the United Kingdom. It also contains an article on European Quality Assurance.

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